

Chapter 23

Urgent Autobiographies: Lived Experiences of Ecology in Photographic Practice

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ABSTRACT

This chapter develops on topics explored in the seminar the author has curated and facilitated for the Global Photographies Network in late 2021 entitled ‘Urgent Stories: Lived Experiences of a Changing planet’, bringing together photography and arts practice, eco-philosophy, science and literature. Whilst the six-day seminar series looked to address the question of ‘What climate collapse asks of us?’, this chapter looks to build a cohesive understanding of how photographic practice can respond to environmental change by focusing on ecological awareness and storytelling in autobiography- and lived experienced-based work. Drawing from the photographic work of seminar participants, the chapter weaves the elements of memory, archive, and relationship between oral storytelling and photographs into this discussion. Consequently, this chapter argues that storytelling based on first person accounts of ecology and change is not only a valuable tool in climate action, but urgent work in shaping heightened ecological consciousness.

INTRODUCTION

‘Human beings did not invent stories. We arrived inside of them.’ Sophie Strand (2021)

‘All there is, whilst things perpetually fall apart, is the possibility of acting from where we are.’ Vanessa Machado (Machado de Oliveira, 2021)

Lineage, ancestry, inherited or past community networks, in other words, human bonds, are an important part of the ecology of the species to which we belong, albeit not a central one. Situating ourselves in our own life stories as well as in larger human stories enables us to consider the processes of life and

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death that ultimately, we are. Once we can play with the concertina of our individual human stories, and those of our recent ancestors, we start stumbling upon non-human ecologies so deep and so involved in our own autobiographies, as what we call ‘the self’.

Ecological storytelling asks us to consider that we, individual human beings, don’t have one single story, but thousands, sporulating and happening at the same time and through cycles, irreversibly woven into the processes of other living beings, most of the time in ways which can’t be made fully visible. It seems that because they cannot be made fully visible, most human beings I know see no point in engaging with them, in imagining them and playing with them and witnessing them. How can you witness, honour something invisible? That sounds just too *wooo* for most of us. ‘Because science’ someone held on a mug filled with coffee in a zoom conference last year. Either, or, all or nothing. This chapter invites readers, students, creative humans to use their creative practices and brains to activate the power of ‘and’: there is me *and*... what else is there? This exercise locates human bodies in more than human ecologies.

Ecological autobiographies and lineage stories are thus an essential part of the productive collapse of the ways of thinking and living which evidently are producing violent changes in our planet and in our own selves. As Ailton Krenak puts it ‘If people are not attached / bonded to their ancestral memory, with the references that sustain identity, they will become insane, in this insane world we share’ (Krenak, 2020).

One could argue that within all the human lineages currently in existence we can find stories of extractivism, and its close relatives, white supremacy, and the patriarchy. They can be found in a prism of perspectives and experiences, entangled in the lives of our most recent ancestors, as well as in our own. Positioning our autobiographies within these complex violent systems with curiosity allows us to approach the conditions, limits, and the possibilities of our concrete actions towards social and ecological change. This way, in our new autobiographies, we can see ourselves as descents, accomplices, casualties of the abject events of the world *and* simultaneously resourceful and capable of emergent action. We begin perceiving ourselves as profoundly embedded in wide ecologies / social systems *and* individual beings in our own right. As Alexis argues complicity and compromise are a starting point for action (Shotwell, 2016).

This chapter draws upon eco-philosophy and visual studies literature, alongside the autobiographical and photographic work of the participants of the Global Network Photographies online seminar entitled ‘Urgent Stories’, the first iteration of which happened in November 2021 and which I have designed and facilitated.

The participants were invited to read and discuss literature, to share autobiographical stories of ecology and entanglement, to make work drawing from these stories and experiences. They were also invited to reflect upon how the act of remembering, imagining, shaping, and creating autobiographies as embedded beings within deep ecologies and we all found that this has a profound impact in reframing the way we think about our changing environments. Memory takes here an important role, allowing individuals to make sense of past events and re-think them, as complex, multidimensional and subjective lines of narrative which keep those events alive and useful to us in present day. Photographs in family archives and albums, photographic diaries, recorded oral stream of consciousness, interviews with family members and oral storytelling in a virtual space were some of tools used by participants to activate memory in a first instance. These improvised methodologies lead them to the use of photographic practice to fabricate new autobiographies, framed and conceived through a somewhat paradoxical lens of both ecological decentring and of rooting of the self within somatic experience, lineage, territory.

Celia Lury reminds us that ‘vision and self-knowledge have become inextricably and productively intertwined in modern Euro-American societies’ (Lury, 1998), presenting photography as medium as

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